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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the efforts made by the American Library Association (ALA) and the Mexican Border Traveling Library Service (MBTLS) to ensure that remote World War I outposts, such as the Gerstner Field aviation and military training camp in Louisiana, would have adequate library service. A history of the MBTLS' early organizational success, the ALA's cooperation with the MBTLS and the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), and descriptions of the establishment of Gerstner Field's circulating library building are presented. Also provided are details of how the library later fell under the jurisdiction of the MBTLS under the directorship of Harriet C. Long and grew to a collection of several thousand volumes before it was disbanded after the end of the war. (30 references) (MAB)

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BOOKS FOR GERSTNER FIELD AVIATORS: THE MEXICAN BORDER TRAVELING LIBRARY SERVICE AND ALA IN SOUTHWEST LOUISIANA DURING WORLD WAR I

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Books for Gerstner Field Aviators: The Mexican Border Traveling Library Service and ALA in Southwest Louisiana During World War I

Gerstner Field was a World War I aviation training camp located south of Lake Charles, Louisiana, from 1918 to 1921. Even though it was located in a remote area of southwest Louisiana, Gerstner Field was not overlooked in the American Library Association's (ALA) efforts to provide library service to military personnel during World War I (Huxley 262). On the contrary, one special service, the Mexican Border Traveling Library Service (MBTLS), was maintained especially to insure that remote outposts, such as Gerstner Field, should have adequate library service (Young 42).

The MBTLS was established one year before the United States entered the war. In 1916, Pancho Villa was leading his Mexican revolutionaries on forays into the Texas border towns. President Woodrow Wilson ordered thousands of United States troops to Texas to protect the American citizens living there. Isolated in the small posts along the border and with time on their hands, the soldiers made great use of whatever reading material they could find, dramatically increasing the circulation of books in any library that happened to be within their area. These libraries enlisted the aid of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), and together they organized library facilities and service to the soldiers within the confines of the camps (Gretchen 76; Moses 626).

Although never fully organized, the success of the initial MBTLS was evident through the constant use the books received (Gretchen 76). And, in 1917, when the United States did enter the war and military training camps were set up throughout the nation, ALA used this success to demonstrate the need for providing library service to military personnel within the training camps (Young 11; Moses 626).

ALA, in close cooperation with other organizations ("Books" 31), planned and implemented library service during World War I on a vast scale, serving the military training camps at home and, wherever possible,

overseas (Young 11-12). (A complete history of ALA's involvement in World War I can be found in Books for Sammies: The American Library Association and World War I, by Arthur P. Young, published as Beta Phi Mu Chapbook Number Fifteen.)

ALA's plan to provide library service to the military training camps located in the South called for upgrading the resources and extending the territory of the MBTLS. Two library systems within the MBTLS were established by the Library War Service Committee of ALA. The western system, or branch, operated from the El Paso Public Library and provided service to areas in West Texas and New Mexico. The eastern branch established its headquarters in the San Antonio Public Library and serviced camps in Southeast Texas and Southwest Louisiana ("Mexican;" Young 42). It was this eastern branch of the MBTLS that was ultimately responsible for the library at Gerstner Field.

Gerstner Field was the only military training camp in Southwest Louisiana and the state's only aviation camp. It opened November 11, 1917 (Seiferth 15), and was situated on 1,120 acres of flat prairie land. In addition to barracks for 3,000 cadets, there were 24 hangars housing 140 airplanes, a hospital with 75 medics and nurses, two schools, an officers' club, a YMCA, and many other buildings necessary for the operation of a flying school (Ross). Two bombing fields were adjacent to the camp, the one to the northwest covered 2,230 acres, and the one to the south 3,360 acres (Benoit).

The young cadets assigned to flight training at Gerstner Field had previously been in one of the eight ground schools which had been established at universities throughout the country (Beverly 14). The cadets were usually college students (Reynolds 25) who had been required to pass an entrance examination to get into ground school (Bowen 149). While at the ground schools, they had received eight weeks of basic military training, along with intensive lectures on military science and instruction on airplane engines (Beverly 14; Reynolds 26). Upon their

arrival at Gerstner Field, the cadets attended more classes and received their first instruction in flying (Elliott 45).

According to one ALA official, "The training camp of today is not essentially different from a big university. The fellows work and study a good deal harder in training camps than they would in a university" (Mawson 220-221). The young cadets at Gerstner Field and other camps like it were not ordinary soldiers (Huxley 263), and the flying fields were not ordinary training camps. "The flying fields are in a special class, by reason of the selected quality of the men and their reading habits" (Seward 273-274). Therefore, it was necessary to provide libraries with the materials required by these special young men. "In an aviation camp the men are naturally interested in books on flying and flying machines. They want only the latest and best books" (Stockbridge 451). Reports from camp libraries throughout the United States indicated that the men showed the greatest interest in technical books relating to branches of military science, in books on war and history, in books on the trades and business, and, finally, in fiction (Huxley 263; Mawson 220; Seward 273-274; Stockbridge 451; Van Hoesen 345).

The library at Gerstner Field, as in almost all the border camps served by the MBTLS, was located in the YMCA building (Young 13). Although the YMCA building at Gerstner was completed in February 1918 ("'Y' Social"), there is no record of any books being housed there until April. The cadets, however, did not wait that long to have their needs met. As early as March 1918, they applied for and received permission to use the Carnegie Library in Lake Charles (Carnegie). Their needs must have been pressing for them to travel to Lake Charles, because the shell road to town was not always in good condition (Dricenus), transportation was a serious problem, and free time to make the trip not always easy to come by ("Y.M.C.A.").

In April, the Lake Charles American Press noted that a book drive among the citizens of Lake Charles had netted 300 volumes for the "boys at

the camp and of course they appreciated this very much" ("Flyers"). In correspondence between the YMCA secretary and his superior during the month of June, the library was said to contain "only a few miscellaneous donated books" (Kerr) and that "the books we have are old, some good." The secretary was pleased to learn that ALA headquarters was shipping him 200 technical books for the library (Record 25 June 1918). His superior added that in the "meantime, be assured of our interest and intention to do everything in our power for you and your flying men" (Kerr).

Any security felt by his superior's intentions and assurances were surely short-lived, for by July 15, the YMCA secretary was complaining about the shipment of technical books. He wrote, "As yet we have not received any books at all from the Library Association." He went on to explain that the YMCA library had not received the books because they had been mistakenly shipped to the Officers' Club. "Just why he (the chairman of the ALA War Service Committee) judged that the Circulating Library of the YMCA was not the place for those books I am not able to say. Everybody in this camp, officers included, have access to this library and they all use it. No one can get to the officers club (sic) library but the select few. I think he made a bad mistake in sending those books to that club. They should have been put here where all could have gotten at them. Furthermore, we have as intelligent and well-educated men among the enlisted mechanics here as you will find among the officers. The men cannot go to the officers club (sic) and obtain those technical books" (Record 15 July 1918).

In the same letter, the YMCA secretary noted that he had "just received two boxes of books sent to us from a small library in some of the neighboring towns" (Record 15 July 1918).

By the end of July 1918, the YMCA building at Gerstner Field was housing what the YMCA secretary called the "Circulating Library" (Record 15 July 1918), which consisted of books donated by area citizens and small local libraries. There are no reports or correspondence available which

indicate the addition of books to the library or its operation during the next few months. But that the library was neither well-organized nor efficiently operated was very evident when, in November 1918, it came under the control of the MBTLS (Long 17).

Miss Harriet C. Long had been carefully selected by ALA as the supervisor of the 69 posts under the jurisdiction of the eastern branch of the MBTLS. ALA recognized her abilities; she was "exceptionally fitted for this work because of her experience in county library work" ("Mexican"). Although headquartered at the San Antonio Public Library, Miss Long spent a great deal of time in the field (Long 2). During her frequent inspection trips to the camp libraries, she would carefully analyze the needs of the men, arrange for additional shipments of books, help the librarians or YMCA secretaries with the existing collection and make any contributions she could (Dricenus; Long 10, 13, 15).

Miss Long noted her reaction to the library in the YMCA building at Gerstner Field in the report she later made to the ALA Library War Service Committee. "Service .... to men," she said, was "abominable." There was "no close supervision." And, "conditions on my visit made me blush for ALA." Interestingly enough, she reported that the Officers' Club had a "good collection" and that it was "well cared for" (Long 17).

Miss Long immediately went to work organizing the collection and motivating the current YMCA secretary. As a later report from Mr. L.L. Dricenus, ALA field representative, stated, "Miss Long visited here a couple of weeks ago and started the machinery working" (Dricenus). In her report to the committee, Miss Long stated that she had "sent (a) fine non-fiction collection and since, added fiction, so that now it (the collection) should be fairly good" (Long 17). Mr. Dricenus also reported that Miss Long had "sent 154 class books." He was in the library when the books from Miss Long were unpacked and noted that it was a "splendid lot and will circulate well. Three hundred volumes require processing, but supplies are here and I arranged for a soldier detail to do the work"

(Dricenus).

It must have been with some pride that Mr. Dricenus could report that between Miss Long and himself, "We have done everything that is necessary for the present. The 154 books that Miss Long sent are splendidly selected and there are books enough on the ground(s) to take care of normal needs if they are well cared for. I hope Miss Long can run in here again in a couple of weeks. Secretaries are instructed to wire in case of conspicuous needs" (Dricenus).

The library at Gerstner Field continued to operate past the signing of the Armistice on November 11, 1918 ("Gerstner 'Y'"). Although no evidence exists in the form of reports or correspondence, the library probably continued to function as efficiently as the other libraries under Miss Long's care.

Gerstner Field began demobilization as soon as the war ended. But demobilization was slow, and as long as there were men at the camp, the library was available to them. Indeed, the library was called upon to fill a postwar need almost as vital as the war effort. The men left in the camps began to think about their future. "Pending discharge, soldiers' reading habits shifted dramatically. Demand for technical works and books about the war dropped sharply. About to reenter civilian life and obtain a job, the men looked for information about every imaginable trade and profession" (Young 55).

It wasn't until May 1919, when the YMCA building was sold that "several thousand Gerstner YMCA library books" were "removed from the shelves and packed in 12 huge cases for shipment to San Antonio" ("Gerstner Library"). Books removed from demobilized military bases were usually sent to base libraries still operating overseas or distributed to the state and public libraries (Gretchen 77). Perhaps this is what happened to the Gerstner Field Circulating Library. There were no records found to indicate differently.

Today, Gerstner Field is gone. Hidden under prairie grass, a few

concrete foundations and sewer pipes remain to indicate the location of Southwest Louisiana's major contribution to World War I. Most of the buildings were dismantled and sold, although the YMCA building was sold intact to a rice farmer and moved to his nearby farm ("Two Y"). The YMCA records were reported as having been sent to the Southern Headquarters in San Antonio ("Gerstner 'Y'"); however, none of these could be located during the research for this article. The Mexican Border Traveling Library Service records, which were kept on file at the San Antonio Public Library, remain in the ALA Archives.

The enthusiasm with which the members of ALA met the challenge of providing library service to the military during World War I is commendable. Their innovative solutions to reaching even the remotest of outposts, as evidenced in the Mexican Border Traveling Library Service, demonstrates a dedication not often seen today.

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